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SOVIET UNION - EASTERN EUROPE

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Ponomarev in Damascus:
Smoothing Over Strains?

Soviet Party Secretary Ponomarev's visit to Syria, which ended today, may have been aimed at smoothing over differences between Damascus and Moscow.

In recent weeks there have been some indications that Soviet-Syrian relations have been uneasy.

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--The Soviets probably also agree with [redacted] criticism of Syria's recent grant of off-shore oil prospecting rights to a US company. The Soviets have not commented on this themselves, but they probably fear that it could lead to further Syrian economic liberalization and increased economic dealings with the West. In addition, the action undercuts the monopoly the Soviets and their East European allies have heretofore had in oil exploration in Syria.

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The timing of Ponomarev's trip may have been related to Foreign Minister Khaddam's visit last week to Washington. Ponomarev plays an active role in Middle East matters and his visit could have been designed to buck up Syrian resistance to Washington's entreaties as well as obtain a reading on Khaddam's conversations with Secretary Kissinger.

Ponomarev seemed defensive about the impact of US-Soviet detente on Moscow's relations with the Arabs. In a television address, he argued that detente was not inconsistent with Moscow's support for Syria and the Arabs, but instead should be viewed as an integral part of the struggle against imperialism.

Ponomarev apparently did not have great success in soothing the Syrians. He spent most of his time with secondary figures and met only once with Asad. A Soviet commentator characterized the atmosphere of the trip as one of "frankness and cordial understanding"--a euphemism for tough talk.

Despite these signs of trouble, it seems unlikely that Moscow and Syria will let their relations deteriorate significantly. Both need the other too much, particularly now that there is a renewed prospect of US-sponsored negotiations between Egypt and Israel.

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Gromyko To Italy
for Periodic Consultations

Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko will arrive in Italy tomorrow for two days of talks. In 1972, the Soviets and Italians agreed to hold periodic political consultations; the last talks took place in Moscow a year ago.

Gromyko will cover the usual range of topics --the European security summit, the Vienna force reduction talks, the Middle East, Cyprus, disarmament, and bilateral economic relations. He may also lay the groundwork for a projected visit by General Secretary Brezhnev to Rome later this year.

The substance of these consultations is not likely to be very important. They will serve as an expression of Moscow's continuing interest in maintaining cordial state-to-state relations with the government in Rome even while Soviet media hail the victory of the Italian Communists and the rebuff of the "anti-Soviet" campaign waged by the Christian Democrats and their allies.

Gromyko will want to get a feel for how the swing to the left in Italy, about which the Soviet press is talking, can be turned into a net gain for the Soviets. He will probably touch base with PCI chief Berlinguer, although Gromyko will anticipate that Berlinguer will use the election results to buttress his long-standing arguments that the Italian Communists do not need advice from Moscow on how to make their way in Italian politics. Gromyko also would like to get some idea of how hard Berlinguer is likely to push his ideas on the proper role of a Communist party in Western Europe in the preparatory meetings for a European Communist party conference.

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Czechoslovakia: Ultraconservatives Win One

The naming of ultraconservative Viliam Salgovic to the Presidium Politburo of the Slovak Communist Party strengthens the conservatives' hold on the leadership in Bratislava. Salgovic's promotion is also a tactical blow to the moderate faction of the national party. He is reportedly a personal friend of Vasil Bilak, a like-minded Slovak who is considered to be party leader Husak's chief rival in the leadership.

Salgovic evidently replaces the moderate, Ondrej Klokoc, the chairman of the Slovak National Council, who died in March. No successor to Klokoc's government post has been named, and Salgovic may now have the inside track for that slot. The delay in naming a successor to Klokoc suggests that the moderates lost that political struggle too.

Salgovic is one of the most unsavory of the Czechoslovak ultraconservatives. During the 1968 "Prague Spring," when he was deputy minister of interior, he served as a willing tool of the Soviets. With advance knowledge of the August invasion, Salgovic plotted the arrest of the reform leaders. He reportedly was to be a key figure in the aborted pro-Soviet coup. Salgovic's open collaboration with the Soviets in the immediate wake of the invasion led to his dismissal from the Interior Ministry.

Along with numerous other ultraconservatives, Salgovic began to re-enter the political arena under Husak's policy of "normalization." Since 1970, he has served as chairman of the Slovak party's Control and Auditing Commission and deputy chairman of the national party's Central Control and Auditing Commission. Salgovic is now expected to relinquish these positions.

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Bulgaria: New High Priestess
of Cultural Affairs

Lyudmila Zhivkova, daughter of Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov, yesterday was named to head the Committee for Art and Culture, which is attached to the Council of Ministers. She recently has been assuming a more prominent role in governmental affairs, and her new position--which carries ministerial rank--will increase her prestige.

Zhivkova, formerly a first deputy minister of art and culture, replaces Pavel Matev, who was shifted to the Department for Art and Culture at the Central Committee. Her appointment and Matev's reassignment suggest that Zhivkova has been calling the shots on the cultural scene for some time. Matev's transfer could be a demotion--since his new post was not filled for over two years.

The regime may be grooming Zhivkova for an even more prestigious position. She serves as official hostess for her father, a widower, and has long been prominent in official state functions. She accompanied Foreign Minister Mladenov on his recent trips to Egypt and West Germany, and led a cultural delegation to Austria earlier this year.

Zhivkova's appointment will probably produce reverberations in neighboring Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs last February lambasted her for saying Macedonians are ethnic Bulgarians. Belgrade may view her promotion as a further indication of Sofia's intransigence on the issue.

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Romania and the CEMA Statutes

Bucharest is fighting a rear-guard action against the impact of CEMA's revised statutes on its sovereignty and freedom of maneuver. The new statutes, agreed upon by CEMA members last June but only ratified by Romania on May 30, are intended to strengthen CEMA's authority over its members. Romania apparently put off ratification as long as it reasonably could.

The modified statutes refer both to "socialist economic integration"--opposed by Bucharest--and to the "gradual equalization of levels of economic development," which Romania favors. The Romanians are now trying to use the new language to buttress their position that equalization of development levels must be a prerequisite for movement toward integration.

This became clearer in a recent conversation between a US diplomat and Vasile Doreanu, a Romanian trade official, who tried to play down the "practical" significance of the statutes. He claimed that neither the ratification of the statutes nor Bucharest's signing of the CEMA "complex program" represented a change in Romania's basic opposition to granting supranational authority to CEMA organs.

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